Lea SORGER

UNDER THE WING OF CHANCE

Lea Sorger was born on June 17, 1923, in Sarajevo, to father Josip Bretler and mother Čarna, née Cveher. She has a younger brother, Hajim.

Until the beginning of the second world war, the family lived in Sarajevo. All members of Lea's immediate family survived the Holocaust, but a number of members of her closer and extended family, on both her mother's and her father's side perished.

When the war ended, Lea returned to Belgrade together with her husband Maks Sorger, whom she had married in Italy, and their newborn son, Mladen. She completed her high school education, which had been interrupted by the war, and enrolled in language studies. She graduated while working at the Yugoslav-Italian Chamber of Commerce and raising two young children.

After graduation she worked as an English language teacher in schools.

From her marriage with Maks Sorger she has two children, a son Mladen, a daughter Jelica, and four grandchildren.

She lives in Belgrade.

My family lived in Sarajevo. We were a large family. My grandparents on both sides had come from Poland during the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, following their stomachs to bread. Because

a number of public works were underway in Bosnia, there was work everywhere. My maternal grandfather was a watchmaker and came to Višegrad, where he opened a shop. My mother and her twin sister were born there, followed by her brother and another sister. They remained in Višegrad until 1914, when the first world war broke out. Višegrad was on the border between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Serbia, so they fled to Sarajevo. They had planned earlier to move there. My mother and her sister had just finished four grades of primary school and this meant they and the other children could continue their schooling there. They were very successful in Sarajevo. They opened a shop which, before the war, was one of the most famous watchmaker's, jewellery and optical shops in the city.

My grandmother (whose maiden name was Frid), came to Bosnia when she was four or five months old. She lost her mother early and was brought up by her mother's sister. She had a younger brother who emigrated to America during the first world war. We were in contact after the second world war but later lost touch. He died without children.

I didn't know my paternal grandfather, who died before I was born. My grandmother returned as a girl in the great migration. She was the eldest of a large number of children. Her mother exploited her, or so she felt, and, at the first chance she had, when a family of friends came to Bosnia, she joined them and cut off all contact with her family. Later she married my grandfather and managed to bring up three children as a young widow. My father was the middle child of his parents. He left home at the age of fourteen, learnt the typography trade and, as a very industrious, clever and bright man, achieved a great deal in a very short time. Before the war he was the director of a printing house which published one of the two biggest newspapers in Sarajevo. He was a representative for the Croatian Paper Industry. He set up a factory to make small bags for food staples and various other goods. Today this would probably be called a workshop, but it was a very successful one. He was very active both professionally and in Jewish social life. In 1932, he built a house in Sarajevo which we moved into. This house was in the centre of the city, in what was then Kralja Petra Street. We lived on the ground floor of this three-storey building, rented out the first floor and my mother's twin sister and her family were on the second floor. They had a daughter three months older than me and a son who was a year younger than my brother, so we always had company. I went to school

together with my cousin until matriculation. We sat at the same school desk and had the same friends. It was only when we grew up that we began seeking our own company, and later it was boys, but the war soon brought a halt to everything.

In 1941, when I was in my final year of secondary school, the war broke out, and in the cruellest way – with bombing. The school stopped working. Fortunately no one from my family was killed in the bombing, but problems began. All of our plans, mine included, were dissipated. I was practically engaged. My boyfriend had just graduated in law and I was about to matriculate and we had planned to go to Belgrade. I wanted to study languages and my boyfriend planned to become a legal advisor in a company. His parents owned an apartment in Belgrade, near the city centre, close to where I now live.

When they began rounding up Jews in Sarajevo, they began in the main street, where he lived. The day they came for them he sent me a message through his maid, who ran to our place to tell us that we would be next and that we should flee. My fiancé's name was Silvio Gaon.

We had all been thinking of fleeing anyway. I had also suggested to him that we should run, but he said that he couldn't leave his parents behind. My mother's brother, with his wife, also perished in the same way with them, not wanting to leave his parents. He couldn't leave my grandfather and grandmother. My boyfriend was taken to Jasenovac. I heard, although I am not certain of this, that he was killed before his father's eyes because he had taken a slice of bread from somewhere.

The four of us left home, our nicely-decorated four-room apartment, with three suitcases. We had been living a very comfortable, nice life. We managed to flee thanks to an acquaintance of my father's. Because this man was often in financial difficulties, my father, who was a kind-hearted man, had often helped him out and lent him money. He felt the need to repay this kindness in some way and so took us to his apartment and then accompanied us to the railway station. This was in September, 1941. There were four of us, my brother was five years younger than me, a child of 13. My brother's name is Hajim, but we called him Braco and that name has stayed with him to this day. My mother's name was Čarna and my father's Josip, they called him Joži. Somehow we got on a train. We set off for Split, because we knew that Split was under Italian administration. We wanted at all costs to go somewhere where there were no Germans or Ustaša. Dalmatia belonged to the Independent State of Croatia, but the Italians were in

Split. Somewhere near Mostar, I'm not sure if it was exactly there, we got off the train and continued by bus. We had to get out of the vehicle because there was some Ustaša checkpoint on the border between Croatia and the Italian occupation zone. They asked us for our documents, permits to continue. Now my father suddenly remembered something important. As director of the printing company he had been given a permit by the German occupation authorities to move around Sarajevo, even after the curfew. On this document there was a stamp with a swastika. He showed this document to the border guard who was, I suppose, semi-literate, and when he saw the swastika that was enough for him and he let us pass. We continued our journey and reached Split.

In Split we ran into people we knew. There were many of our people there, and not only from Sarajevo. At first we lived for some time in private accommodation and then in Sumporna Banja, the sulphur spa. This building no longer exists. It was a kind of hotel. We had some money and we managed to get by. Later, mother's sister also arrived with her family, the ones with whom we had lived in the house in Sarajevo.

I remember that I began learning Italian then. Newspapers were published half in Croatian and half in Italian, so I could compare and learn. I already spoke French. In this way, I passed the time more easily. A month or two later there was an order issued for refugees to be placed under house arrest until further notice. We in Sumporna Banja didn't know what was going to happen to us. I think that this applied only to Jews. One day they came for us and said they were taking us somewhere. We were taken on board a boat. The Italians were playing at being strict rather than actually being so, this is the impression we had of them compared to the Germans.

They separated the men from the women. Younger boys stayed with their mothers. And so, on this boat, we were separated from father during the journey. We didn't know anything about where one another was. The boat was armoured.

We arrived in Trieste. From Trieste they drove us in buses to various small places. We were taken to the province of Treviso, to a mountain place called Asolo which was a resort for wealthy Venetians. Here they had houses and villas and the locals rented out rooms to tourists. One such room, a floor in fact, was given to us by a family which owned a grocery store. There were four of us, because my cousin and

her family did not leave Split with us. They had gone to Hvar before that, because they had some acquaintances there. My uncle, an engineer, was a department head in the Yugoslav Railways. He was a state civil servant, quite a bit older than my father, and had already considered retiring, drawing a pension and finding shelter on an island. So they went to Jelsa on Hvar, and then to the camp on Rab, where my uncle and his daughter went off with the Rab Battalion. Unfortunately my aunt and her son were captured by the Germans somewhere in Lika among a mass of refugees and were executed.

We stayed in a small, very pretty place on a mountain. We spent our days in internment with another seventy or so souls, Jews from Sarajevo, Zagreb and Belgrade. The locals behaved towards us in various different ways. There were organised Fascists, and they kept their distance and looked at us disapprovingly. Others behaved towards us in the same way they treated anyone they rented a room to. They were wondering who we were, what we were. We were forbidden to socialise with them. Our movements were limited. I don't know how many kilometres we were allowed to move around in, between dawn and dusk. We also received some assistance. Rent was paid for families and each person was given enough money to cover the most basic costs of food, in food coupons of course.

It was not until the 'fifties, here in Belgrade, that I learnt where this assistance came from. I read a book by my friend Danko Samokovlija, "A Dollar a Day". In this he explains that he was first in prison and then reached the Rab Battalion. His mother was in hospital and, during visits, they noticed that the patients weren't receiving any medicine. They were simply lying there, being given the very minimum to eat and nothing else. They asked a doctor why this was so and he said that they were being given as much as was covered by one dollar a day, in Italian lire. After Italy capitulated, the head of the hospital was captured. Again they asked him what he had meant when he said they were being given one dollar's worth a day. He explained that the Italian authorities had decided that not much money should be spent on Jewish patients and sent out a memorandum forbidding them to spend more than a dollar a day, which was the amount American Jews were donating for every Jew alive. Whether this was really true I don't know, but this is what he claimed and I believe it. It appears that I really survived thanks to that dollar a day.

We remained there until Italy's capitulation, until September, 1943.

How did we spend our days? Among us young people there were students and also those of us who wanted to study but were unable to, so we sought ways to make our days pass more quickly. We organised classes for the children, so that their education would not be interrupted. I worked with four children up to the age of ten. I remember that it was terrible for my father. He was without his career, which he had successfully built with his own ten fingers from the time he was fourteen. He suffered a great deal. Along with suffering because everything he had built was now lost, he also found it very difficult not to have anything to do. He had been accustomed to working all the time and now he really fell into a bad state and lost weight. Physically I had never looked better. Quite simply there was nothing to wear myself out and the air was excellent. And so we endured, from one day to the next, we never knew what tomorrow would bring. Adult refugees had to report every day to the *questura*. In order to avoid all reporting individually, which would have disrupted our regular work, we had to choose a representative who reported in every day for all of us and guaranteed that we were all there.

They gave us an identity card which bore the words *Internati civili di Guerra* in red ink. We could move around during the day within a radius of four kilometres, I think. Once I went with Mother to the town of Trevizo, because her eyesight was weak and she had to see a doctor. We needed to get permission for this. I don't think we had to have identity cards, but we asked for them. Later, this was one of our documents from the wartime. When Italy capitulated, we were in a panic, because we knew the Germans would soon arrive from the north. We were very close to Tyrol in Austria. Somehow everybody got themselves together and made their own plans. We were making plans together, as a family. My father was unable to make the decision to escape again into uncertainty, while I did not want to again part from a man with whom I had fallen in love, so I joined his family.

We decided to flee southward, because we knew that the Americans were to come ashore in the south of Italy.

It was first necessary to get to a nearby place by bus and then travel further by train. There was a lot of changing trains, you couldn't go forward, you had to backtrack, then go forward again and in this way we came to Pescara. There we were met by bombing. We left our things

in the station cloakroom and were given receipts. We took with us only our rucksacks and few things. Now our wandering around began. We reached the interior on some local train. Later, I remember, we stopped in the Salmona tunnel, unable to go either forwards or backwards. We left the train and continued on foot. We came across a group of boys and began chatting to them. They told us they would take us to their village. We arrived in the village and settled in. The people there were very kind. Again there was an air raid. The aircraft flew very low and fired all around from machine guns. Somehow we survived. The family with whom we were staying used to bring us food. We stayed there until we realised there was no sense in wasting time, and that we needed to head south, towards the Americans. Again we separated. My future husband and I set off on our own. His name was Makso Sorger and he was from Daruvar. He had finished secondary school in Zagreb and his elder brother was working there. He had begun to study law. Then his brother had suddenly died. My future husband had had to interrupt his education. They were rather poor and he had no financial security. He had to get a job and later moved to Belgrade.

And so the two of us headed south on our own. We would hide in the huts in which the Italians made charcoal. We slept on beds of ferns. One night a German patrol came by. They came into our hut and asked us for directions because they were lost. They were speaking in German and they noticed my husband's green socks. And one said to the other in German: "Let's take his socks!" And the other said "Oh, leave it, you'll get new ones when we get to the base." Of course we were pretending not to speak German. We showed them the direction they should take using gestures. From here we kept listening all the time to the movement of troops and heavy artillery. One minute we would think they were advancing, then that they were retreating, now going in one direction, then the other. In the end, after that night, we finally did arrive, following tracks to where we came across the first Americans. It was October 24, 1943. For us, this was the day of rescue, of freedom.

We told the Americans who we were and where we were coming from There was one Jew among them, I remember his name was Kaufman. We made contact with him. Before the war I had begun to take private lessons in English and I had learnt German and French in school, so we somehow managed to communicate. I didn't know much, but enough for us to understand each other. My husband told me to take the chain with the Mogen David from my neck and give it to him as a

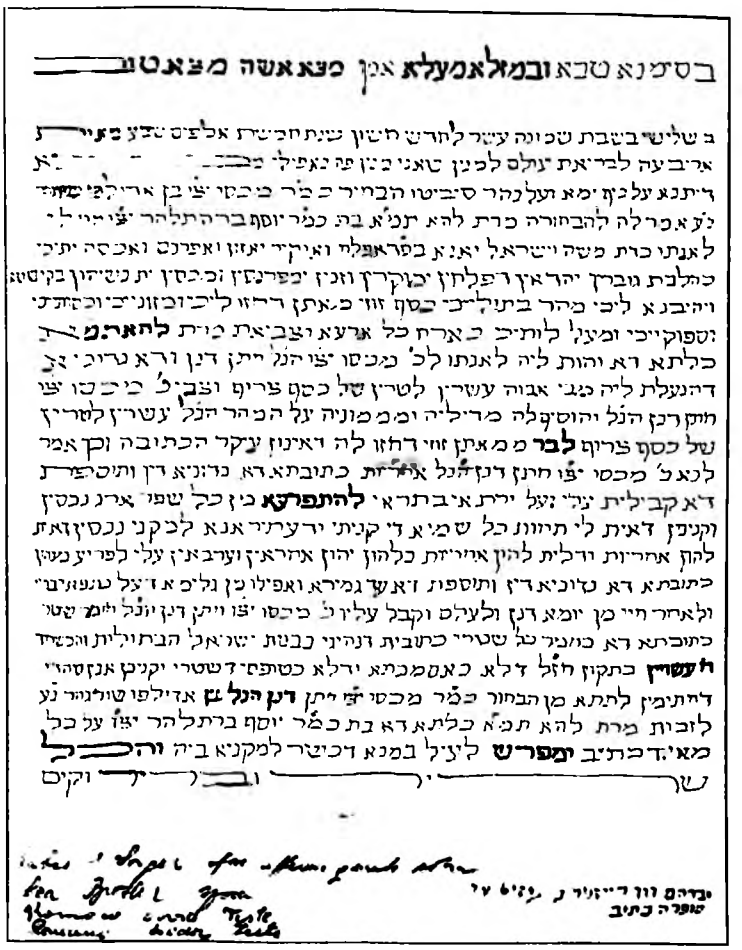
gift. I had never once taken it off all through the war, even though it had been dangerous in some situations. He told me "Give it to him, let him send it to his wife in America." And so I did.

We continued our journey, according to the direction he had given us. I no longer remember how we went on, part of the way by train, partly by horse and cart. In any case we headed south. We spent one night in an Allied hospital, in Benevento. I remember this night was horrifying because we could hear the wounded all the time. Somehow we reached Naples. I think the Americans took us there in their vehicles. In Naples we reported to a refugee centre. They asked us whether we wanted to work or whether we wanted assistance. We wanted to work. Because my knowledge of Italian and English was enough for me to communicate, they took me to work in an institution where the Americans needed to hire Italians for physical labour. I was an interpreter for the Italians and the Americans. My husband, who was an economist by profession, said that he would find a job somewhere he could eat. He got a job in a kitchen for the Americans, so he also brought me food from there. For some time, we got by like that.

I don't know why I stopped working there. The front was very close. The Americans set up a centre where they could bring their soldiers from the front lines for a couple of days' rest. Here they were given the best food, they could change their clothes, they had rooms with indoor games, sports fields and a shop. I was packing souvenirs and they were sending them to America. I had to make boxes and packages from various kinds of cardboard.

In the meantime, we wanted to make our relationship somehow official, to register a civil marriage. But for this marriage, they were asking for documents which we didn't have. So we decided there was no other option: we would go to a synagogue. We found a synagogue. There they required at least two witnesses. Fate, which so often takes a hand, didn't abandon us now. In the street I ran into two Sarajevo Jews who used to play table tennis in the yard of our house with a young man who lived on the second floor. I knew them well so I asked them to be our witnesses and they agreed. In the meantime we bought wedding rings of some metal and took them to the temple. They quickly went to a restaurant and got a glass. According to Jewish custom this is broken so that the pieces of glass symbolise prosperity. During the wedding ceremony, the rabbi asked whether the wedding ring my husband was giving me was real gold. The witnesses looked at my husband, he nod-

ded and so we were married. This was on Tuesday, November 18, 1943, in the morning. The rabbi wrote us a document in Italian, and he also wrote for us a *ketubah* in Hebrew, the Jewish nuptial agreement. I still have this marriage document. When my daughter was getting married in Israel it served very nicely for her to prove that she was Jewish. I photocopied it and sent it to her.



Ketuba, the prenuptial agreement, handwritten in Hebrew, given to Lea and Maks by the rabbi at their wedding in Naples, and which, many years later, served as credible evidence for her daughter to prove that she was Jewish at her wedding in Israel

A little later this American centre was moved to Caserta. There I became pregnant. The landlady with whom we lived was very happy about this news – she said it was a good sign for their house that a child had been conceived in it.

As the Allies were advancing to the north, the centre also moved to Rome. While out walking in Rome, we ran into some people from Sarajevo who told us there was a National Liberation of Yugoslavia Committee in Rome. We immediately went there and registered. They told us they would send us to Bari, where the headquarters were. This was August, 1944. By now I was no longer able to work because of my

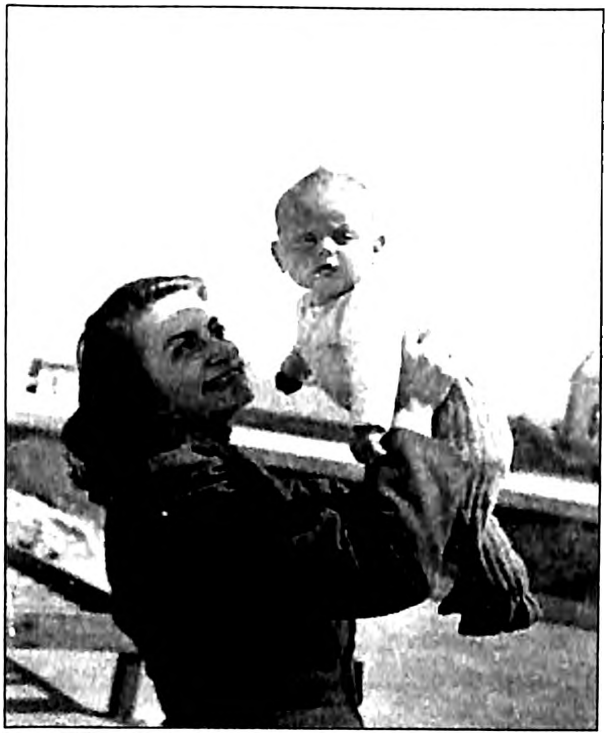
pregnancy. Now we set off to Bari in a jeep. The roads were rutted, we went through villages, through gullies, the jeep travelling very fast, this journey was a real adventure. When we arrived my husband was assigned to the technical service of the base headquarters where some kind of bulletin was being published for various units of our National Liberation Army in Italy. In this editorial office he made copies of articles, because he knew how to use a typewriter. I helped as much as I was able, dictated, made corrections and did other work. Here we would come across acquaintances from Yugoslavia.

When I was due to go into labour, I went straight to the camp at Carbonara di Bari. This camp was built for people of various nationalities who happened to be in Italy during the war. Greatest in number were Ethiopians. There were our people there too, mostly from Dalmatia, who had been brought over by the Partisans: women, children, endangered people from the islands. Again I was a kind of interpreter for our Partisans, for the Italians and British who were in charge of the administration. My husband came from Bari to visit me whenever he could. For eleven months I knew nothing about my parents and my brother who had stayed behind in Asola when the two of us decided to go to the south of Italy. One morning in August, 1944, the camp commandant called me and said, "Go there into the quarantine barracks! They're calling you."

At the entrance of the Carbonara camp there was a quarantine barracks to one side, and across from this barracks the "prison". I went over there and, in the quarantine facility, were my parents and my brother! They had found out that I was here because on the other side, in the "prison" barracks, there was a Jewish woman from Sarajevo with whom I had spoken earlier. She told my parents that I was here. This meeting was a shock to all of us. Everything had happened so suddenly and unexpectedly. When my father saw that I was pregnant, his first question was whether I was married. They were soon out of quarantine. I think that our acquaintance from Sarajevo was in prison because there were unanswered questions about her connection with the Chetniks. She must have been somehow saved by the Chetniks.

My parents had left the place we were interned in together shortly after I did. They had wondered around the non-liberated part of Italy, under the Germans. They didn't hide, they just blended in with the mass of Italians who were also fleeing from one place to another for various reasons. They were hungry, but somehow managed to survive, they

found ways to do this. When my brother, my mother and I used to meet later and recount these stories, each had their own version. I wasn't with them and so cannot judge and say which are true. Father was trying, at the time, to get them to some place in which there was a factory which he had done business with at some time, but it was wartime and he didn't find these people. And so they saw the end of the war. My father was taking it all very hard and my mother used to say that the most difficult thing in her life was not knowing what had happened to me. Father always carried my photograph with him and used to show it to anyone he thought might possibly have run into me somewhere.



Life triumphs, even in the hardest of times: Lea with her son Mladen in Bari, 1945

Later, when I was due to deliver, I went to a place called Gravina, about eighty kilometres from Bari, where there was a Partisan hospital. A building which had once been a technical school now housed the Maternity and Gynaecology Ward. This is where I was delivered. My mother came and so helped me and everyone else in the maternity ward at the time. My doctor was Dr Premru. He told me "When a son is born we doctors immediately say it's a son, but when a daughter is born we say a beautiful healthy child, everything is all right." When I had a son, he jokingly said to my husband: "You have a beautiful healthy child." He didn't immediately say "a son".

We stayed a while longer in the technical department of the base headquarters, making a room out of a former kitchen. I was young, nothing was too hard for me. I was a happy mother. We had already learnt to improvise. Anything could be improvised. The baby needed to be bathed. What can we do? Italy, cooking oil, cans for cooking oil. My husband took a few cans to a tradesman for him to make a baby bath.

This bath, lined with blankets, was also a cot. Nappies and baby clothes were given to us by an acquaintance, the head of the Partisan hospital. Later I removed the sleeves from a jumper of mine and made trousers for the child. We somehow found ways to get by. And everything went smoothly until I developed a severe case of appendicitis. I had a high temperature and was breastfeeding the child, so there was nothing I could do but leave the child with my mother and go in for surgery at the Partisan hospital in the primary school building, again in Gravina. I had to stay there for ten days. My mother somehow managed with powdered milk. The child lost weight, but in the end everything was fine. This was in May, 1945, and by June that year it was time for us to return to our liberated homeland.

We travelled to Split by ship. And then everyone went their own way. My parents went to Sarajevo, but my husband, who had lived in Belgrade before the war, wanted us to somehow get to Belgrade. They got us to Zadar where we were to get a plane to Belgrade. We waited and waited for that plane, but it never seemed to come. We needed to find a cot for the child again, so somehow a rabbit cage was turned into one. Before that a case for oranges had served as a crib.

Because there was no plane, we got into a truck and travelled through Velebit to Zagreb. The truck was carrying bags of salt and on top of the bags of salt were my husband and I with Mladen who was four and a half months old at the time. We named him after debating whether he should be Mladen, to be always young, or Zdravko, to be always healthy.

We somehow managed to reach Zagreb. It was a difficult trip, we had a thermos flask and would take ordinary water from taps at stations and powdered milk and feed the child that way.

When we arrived in Zagreb we found a lively city full of young people. The Youth Congress was being held. My best friend from Sarajevo was in Zagreb, she had come from the Rab camp and, later, from battle. In Zagreb she was living in some richly decorated, abandoned apartment. We slept there, on Persian carpets, until we were able to get to Belgrade.

We arrived in Zemun. The railway bridge had been demolished so they got us into the city over the road bridge, in a horse and cart. We reported to the Command and were given accommodation in the building which today houses Radio Belgrade. Before the war this was a hotel, Zanatski Dom. We had a room there and our son's crib was now

the little table on which suitcases are put in hotel rooms. We made a fence of chairs around it.

My uncle, who had been in German captivity, was already in Belgrade. He was an officer. He came to visit us, but we weren't in the room. Later we found a gold coin which he had put under the child's pillow. He had no children of his own, his wife had perished in Sajmište.

Soon we acquired an apartment of our own. We lived in this apartment for quite a long time. Two years later we also had a daughter. And so a new life began. I always regretted that I had never studied as I had planned to, but only taken care of the children and the house, and I found it very difficult when I was socialising and people would talk about work. I suffered a lot and didn't want to live like that. As soon as my son began the first year of primary school and my daughter was in kindergarten, I enrolled at the university to study languages which was what I had always wanted to do, what I knew and loved. I knew that I would be able to graduate, despite having two children. While I was studying I worked for the Yugoslav-Italian Chamber of Commerce. As soon as I graduated I went to work teaching English in a school, which I had always wanted to do, and I worked there until I retired.

My parents returned to Sarajevo. There my brother finished "Partisan" secondary school, completing two years in one, and then enrolled at Zagreb University, in the Faculty of Electrical Engineering. Later, in Israel, he graduated and gained a master's degree in chemistry. He emigrated to Israel with the first aliyah, and my parents left the following year, with the second. Unfortunately, my father wasn't able to endure all these difficulties and changes, and he died a year later. We decided that my mother should come to Belgrade and live with us, and here she died at a very old age. My brother, who by now had a family, moved to Switzerland for business reasons, and lives there to this day. In the meantime, my husband died and our children each went their own way – my daughter to Israel and my son to Canada – and I stayed here alone. We see each other occasionally and speak regularly on the telephone. Our extended family now lives in seven different countries!